

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-ABALTIMORE SUN
17 January 1986

Soviet offer raises hopes of arms pacts

Kremlin still wants to stop 'star wars'

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MOSCOW — After failing to persuade President Reagan to scrap his Strategic Defense Initiative at the summit talks in Geneva, Switzerland, Mikhail S. Gorbachev now appears to be trying to achieve the same goal through several significant concessions in his ambitious disarmament proposal, diplomats said yesterday.

In addition, one Soviet scholar suggested privately, the Gorbachev plan also may be aimed more at the forthcoming U.S. presidential campaign than at the lame-duck Reagan administration.

"We hope that President Reagan will negotiate about the proposal. Personally, however, I think he is too deeply committed to 'star wars' to cancel it," said the Soviet scholar, a member of a Kremlin think tank.

"Maybe the next president will take a different view," the scholar added. "We cannot afford 'star wars' — and neither can the United States."

The scholar — and other Soviet officials who were sounded out at a diplomatic reception last night — appeared to regard the initiative by the Soviet Communist Party leader as a long-awaited move that had added a dose of realism to previous Soviet positions that had not worked.

Thus, they said, the Soviet Union had dropped its demand that Britain's and France's independent nuclear arsenals be part of any arms-reduction settlement in Europe ne-

gotiated with the United States.

Instead, Wednesday's proposal calls for a pledge from Britain and France not to build up their nuclear arsenals while the Soviet Union and the United States begin reducing their nuclear capability in Europe. The British and French arsenals would later be dismantled in a universal junking of nuclear weapons.

Western diplomats said the concession was important because it would make the Kremlin proposal more attractive in Britain and West Germany, both countries with strong peace movements.

"The Soviets must be looking beyond Thatcher and Kohl," one diplomat said, referring to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

Both of those conservative leaders are more supportive of close ties to the United States than are their primary political opponents. The Kremlin would prefer Social Democrat Johannes Rau in office instead

of Mr. Kohl and the Labor Party's Neil Kinnock. Instead of Mrs. Thatcher.

The Gorbachev proposal to rid the world of nuclear arms by the year 2000 envisages a three-stage disarmament process that would start with reductions by the Soviet Union and the United States.

At the same time, the superpowers would agree to stop all nuclear testing and ban all space weapons.

During the proposal's second and third stages, nuclear weapons possessed by all other countries also would be dismantled.

In what the Soviets hoped would be taken as a sign of good will and seriousness, Mr. Gorbachev announced that his country had ex-

tended by three months a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and invited Washington to join the ban. But the Reagan administration rejected the moratorium yesterday, calling it a propaganda move, as the administration has in the past.

Soviet officials yesterday described as significant the Gorbachev initiative's changed attitude toward on-site inspections.

In talking about monitoring nuclear testing as well as a proposed ban on chemical weapons, Mr. Gorbachev said, "Verification is no problem as far as we are concerned." In both cases he indicated that the Soviet Union would be willing to permit "on-site inspections whenever necessary."

The Soviets previously have maintained that sufficient monitoring could be assured through "national technical means," a euphemism for satellite surveillance and other forms of spying.

Yet another modification in the Soviet position was Mr. Gorbachev's proposal for "the complete elimination of intermediate-range missiles of the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. in the European zone, both ballistic and cruise missiles."

That, according to diplomats, seems to imply the Kremlin's acceptance of the American "zero option," under which Washington has proposed not to deploy cruise and Pershing-2 missiles if Moscow scraps its SS-20s.